

# Buffalo mozzarella company's crowning jewel

*Water buffalo farm changing the landscape of Stirling agriculture*

By Melchizedek Maquiso

Martin Littkemann and Lori Smith's water buffalo farm is slowly changing Stirling's agricultural landscape and its culture as well.

In fact, the town celebrated its first annual Water Buffalo Festival less than a year after Littkemann and Smith successfully milked the first water buffalo in Ontario in November 2008. The celebration has been going on for the past three years.

"We've hardly had enough cheese to put the thing on," Littkemann recalls about the first year when the festival was set up. He estimates that around 700-800 people attended the festival, mostly from different parts of the province.

Littkemann is referring to the company's crowning jewel – the buffalo mozzarella.

Steve Nicholson, chef instructor at Loyalist College, says that the best applications for buffalo cheese could be, among others, cold on a plate like a calabrese type of salad, a little mozzarella, tomato and red onion.

"The cheese can also be melted on top of a chicken dish like a chicken Parmesan, only a little more upscale with the melted buffalo mozzarella," adds Nicholson.

As for the buffalo meat, Nicholson says that "water buffalo is very, very lean so you have to watch your cooking techniques. You can't overcook it. You cook it to about medium at the most. Otherwise, on some of the lesser cuts like the shoulders and things like that, you would braise it for a long time until it's nice and tender."

"You can do almost anything with it as you could with beef," Nicholson adds.

The culinary on-campus gourmet restaurant Club 213 occasionally serves buffalo cheese and meat from Littkemann and Smith's farm. They were introduced to the restaurant a year and a half ago.

The Ontario Water Buffalo Company does not process the cheese. Once the cows are milked, the milk travels 200 kilometres to Quality Cheese in Vaughan for processing.

The farm currently produces 3,500 litres of milk a week, which translates to 1,000 kilos of cheese.

The cheese is being sold at different independent stores across the GTA and southern Ontario.



Photo by Melchizedek Maquiso

**Martin Littkemann is a co-owner of the Ontario Water Buffalo Company in Stirling. He and fellow owner, Lori Smith, were the first in Ontario to successfully milk water buffaloes. The milk is sent to Vaughan to be processed into 'Mozzarella di Bufala', a cheese mostly used for caprese salad, lasagna and pizza.**

Despite a strong agricultural background, Littkemann admitted he and Smith had many sleepless nights during the initial phase of their investment.

"Before we bought an animal, we've invested probably 1,000 to 2,000 hours of research, accounting and business planning and probably \$30,000," says Littkemann.

The money was also used to hire a consultant because there was no established market yet for buffalo milk here.

Littkemann, whose parents owned a farm nearby, obtained his agriculture diploma from the University of Guelph-Kemptville. Smith, on the other hand, was educated as a developmental services

worker. However, she had practical experience working in farms throughout her life. Both have known each other for years.

The buffalo farm started on the 350-acre land Littkemann had since the '90s. He was milking regular cows until 2002 then switched to raising beef until 2007.

"We had the opportunity to sell the milking herd and we had lots of young stocks so it's just to take a breather but then it got sidetracked by mad cow disease. That messed everything up for us and so what we did that's where we went to the beef."

"The beef industry with the BSE (mad cow disease), you have to get your effi-

ciencies quite high to make any profit at it. So we were looking at what other options we have and so we just looked at what we've got here. We already have a milking facility," Littkemann recalls.

A trip at the World Water Buffalo Congress in Italy and a tour of the countryside where they saw for themselves the system involved in processing water buffalo milk convinced them they could raise the animals in Canada.

Littkemann remembers he and Smith asking themselves: "Italy is a little bit warmer than here but not a whole lot. Why can't we do it here and why is it not here? What's the reason why is it not being done here?"

It was also at the same congress that they met the source for their herd, whose farm is located in the state of Vermont. Shortly after the congress in late 2007, they paid the farm a visit in the winter. By the spring of 2008, the first buffaloes arrived.

Four years after importing their first herd and successfully milking them, the founders of the Ontario Water Buffalo Company are already thinking of expanding.

"We plan to build a storefront where meat and cheese can be purchased, hopefully by spring," Littkemann said.

Aside from a storefront, the partners are thinking of increasing their heads to 300 from the current number of 250.

## Deaf community reacts to report

*Drummond recommendation includes merging of three deaf schools*

By Tristan Kong

Members of Ontario's deaf community have reacted with concern over the Drummond Report's recommendation to consider merging three schools for the deaf, in London, Milton and Belleville, into one site.

The report recommended the Ontario government consolidate the schools into one site to achieve a greater critical mass of students from primary grades through secondary school. Savings should be re-invested in the consolidated school for the deaf, with enhanced opportunities for deaf learners in school boards, colleges and universities, the report suggested.

These recommendations are big concerns for the deaf community because people are afraid of losing their identity, culture and language if the government is forced to close the schools.

Gary Wheeler is a spokesman for the Ministry of Education.

"The government is committed to giving students with special education needs – such as deaf and hard of hearing students – the supports they need to succeed."

Wheeler said the government will not speculate surrounding any particular schools or programs that could be closed or changed.

After learning about the Drummond Report, Travis Morgan, Katie Rehman and Chris Kenopic from the deaf community shared their concerns.

"It shows that there are people that think centralization of a critical program such as the schools for the deaf is a wonderful thing," Morgan said.

"By forcing us to travel to Milton, parents are going to say 'Wait a minute, I don't want my child gone from me a week halfway across the province!' It forces them to turn to mainstreaming, which at this moment, is a failure."

Rehman said she is not only concerned about education.

"They will be stripped away of acceptance, educational access, deaf role models, peers and being influenced and impacted by deaf culture/ASL (America Sign Language)," Rehman said.

"They will be forced to live in isolation all in the name of 'mainstream education.' Rehman said her daughters are also very concerned, however, they have been taught to fight for what they believe in.

"It can change the world even if they are just kids," Rehman said.

Kenopic explained that his mother said she is thankful that he went to a deaf school. "My mom had always thought I would have had problems with the law because when I was young, I used to get into fights with hearing kids mocking me for being deaf."



Photo by Tristan Kong

**High school graduates from the Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf, Connie Fern Gouin, 21, and Danielle Hopper, 20, are concerned after learning about the Drummond Report which suggests merging three schools for the deaf in London, Milton and Belleville, into one site.**

Kenopic, who is a currently president and CEO of Canadian Hearing Society, wrote a letter to government officials to express serious concern over the recommendation.

The Ontario Association of the Deaf, and Canadian Association of the Deaf also wrote the letters about the same concern.

"If they close the schools and keep one school open, I will move where I need to go in order for my daughters to continue their deaf education," Rehman said. "My children have already expressed they will never ever go back to mainstream. Not even with ASL interpreter."

"I believe strongly in keeping all deaf schools open. I know there are many kids in those regions who can be recruited into the deaf schools as day or residence students," Kenopic said. "I know if Roberts and SJW close, only a few will travel to E.C. Drury, whereas the rest will get scattered and be sent to school boards where accommodation will be an issue."

There is a group of concerned parents of deaf students and people who have shared their concerns over the Facebook group named Stop The Ontario Government From Closing The Deaf Schools. They began an online petition that has over 440 signatures.

Kenopic said he is waiting on members of the ministry to respond to his letter but now is encouraging parents to send a letter. For Rehman, who was never given the op-

portunity to attend any deaf school because she said her parents were against the ideas of using ASL, said she was never around the deaf community until she was older.

"I struggled all the way with who my identity was. For me growing up, it was shameful to be deaf," Rehman said. "I fell asleep at school because I had to lip-read constantly. I had a hard time with friends because I couldn't hear and they would just get frustrated."

Today as a mother, Rehman said she is now happy that her daughters, nine and 11, who are also deaf, are attending Roberts School for the deaf in London. "In fact, seeing my children having everything I never had is some form a comfort to me. They will not relive my past," Rehman said. "They will be successful."

Morgan did not go to a deaf school when he was young. He said he lived so far away, he felt that he benefited from not going. "However, I do wish I lived closer to a deaf school so I could get the social experience while living with my family."

Today, Morgan is the father of a two-year-old hearing son.

"I learned from being mainstreamed. It placed me in a unique position to help with the Deaf community. It's not an experience I would recommend, however."

Kenopic said he was always felt isolated with no one to talk to when he was at hearing school. He says it was not until 1974 that he learned there was a Deaf school called Sir James Whitney in Belleville.

"I never knew sign language until I went to SJW... that's when I realized when people were signing to each other they were understanding what they were talking about," Kenopic said.

Today as a father, Kenopic said he is now thankful that his son, Braden, who is also deaf, attends E.C. Drury School for the Deaf in Milton.

"My son Braden, I envy his life compared to the one I had when I was his age," Kenopic said.

Kenopic said when he was eight, he thought the world was flat because he had limited knowledge because of the isolation he said he faced at hearing school. His life was changed until he attended deaf school.

"The pro bonus at the deaf school was during recess or at the residence where we were allowed to sign and explore for information," Kenopic said.

Kenopic says Braden knows so much and is able to debate any topic and is more aware of the surroundings and happenings around his environment.

Rehman said ultimately he would have had it better if he attended deaf school. "The ability to have a sound education with wonderful memories. To have deaf peers around me to laugh with and enjoy life," Rehman said.

"Also to be confident, knowing where I was heading in life. To have deaf staff and role models to guide me and to learn from."

## Protest...

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Kramp said he was unaware of any complaints in the riding of Prince Edward – Hastings, but knew about concerns elsewhere.

"There have been identifiable problems in the one riding in Guelph, and like anybody else I'd be disconcerted if there is truth to that," said Kramp. "If there is, whoever's responsible should be held totally accountable to the full extent of the law. I have no challenge with anybody who's abusing the system. There's no room for that in our process but I think to put a broad brush over the entire thing and taint so many people in the process and misuse information and make allegations of thousands and thousands of calls...I think that's unfortunate."

Long-time political journalist and Belleville resident Peter C. Newman said that the robo-calls investigations should be focused now on how widespread it is, and not that the calls happened.

"If there was really the kind of disruption that they're writing about in a major way, right across the country, then that's about as serious as anything can get," said Newman in a telephone interview. "There is proof that it happened, but there isn't any proof about how much it happened, how badly it happened. So I think we have to wait to see the investigation, whether it's something that would have some serious consequences. It's just impossible to tell at the moment."

Newman said that the calls were a way of influencing voters, but that they overstepped the bounds of normal influence.

"In this case, (they were) misleading them, sending them to places where there are no polling stations...that was the tactic," he said. "If it was widespread, it would have a terrifying effect, because there would be many, many seats that are compromised. One hundred ballots can make the difference between a Liberal or Conservative winning."

Newman didn't recall any election in recent history being so plagued with controversy, but didn't want to draw any conclusions due to the pending investigation.

"If it was just the odd, overactive Conservative doing it on his own, then that's one thing. If it was a concerted effort, that's quite different, but we don't know which one it was."



For more on the robo-call rally, scan the bar code or visit [qnetnews.ca](http://qnetnews.ca).